This past May, in the wake of Halley's Comet, renowned ufologist J. Allen Hynek passed away.

ANTI MATTER

UFO UPDATE

Back in 1910, when J. Allen Hynek was five days old, his father took him up on the roof of their home to view the glowing trail of Halley's Comet. Later, as chairman of the astronomy department at Northwestern University, he told his classes, "I hope I get to see it again before I go out." He did just that this winter, when Halley's blazed across the Northern Hemisphere for the first time in 76 years. But this past May, in the comet's wake, Hynek died of a brain tumor. A lifetime framed by visions of the great comet seems appropriate for the man who pioneered the scientific study of the unidentified flying object, or UFO.

When Hynek started his career in the Forties, he produced rigorous papers on supernovas and established a dozen major observatories around the world. So it makes sense that when the Air Force asked him to explain hundreds of UFO reports, he told them saucers were a fad.

Hynek the skeptic ultimately agreed to help the Air Force defuse some of the public panic, signing on as a consultant to the notorious Project Blue Book. For the next 16 years he had access to a vast amount of data on UFOs. And eventually his view began to change. "You can't keep discounting reports from engineers and pilots," he said. "I realized that if one took their reports seriously, patterns emerged."

From the Sixties on it was those patterns that Hynek endeavored to explain. His obsession resulted, in 1972, in the Center for UFO Studies in Evanston, Illinois. A small operation funded by friends, the center produced respectable papers in a field replete with misguided enthusiasts and frauds. Hynek managed to define the UFO and characterize the UFO witness.

He also traveled around the world investigating cases. And to describe contact between humans and aliens, he even coined the phrase *close encounters of the third kind.*

Despite his efforts Hynek was never able to explain the UFO. He didn't believe intelligent life could literally traverse the vastness of physical space. Nor did he accept the notion that saucers were merely illusions. He finally suggested that UFOs were part of a parallel reality, "appearing spontaneously within a limited area and then disappearing to another universe or dimension without a trace."

This otherworldly theory, put forth in Hynek's last years, encouraged already skeptical colleagues and even some supporters to dismiss his case. His troubles were compounded when an anonymous benefactor promised to endow a million-dollar UFO center in Scottsdale, Arizona. Hynek left his longtime home in Evanston to start the facility, only to find that the offer had been withdrawn.

Yet such struggles seem the price that must be paid by those who challenge our mundane notions of reality, transcending the bounds of time and space. In his finest moments Hynek saw the limits of twentieth-century science—he spoke of twenty-first-century science, thirtieth-century science, and beyond. Our foremost ufologist also loved the romance of the UFO. "I imagine myself in front of the fireplace," he once said, "entertaining friends not with ghost stories but with one interesting UFO tale after the next."